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The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory

Description

Review of *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* / Buc, Philippe.
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

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The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory

Posted on **November 1, 2002** by **Editor**



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Buc, Philippe. *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

In the last thirty years studies about ritual behavior have proliferated as more and more disciplines have found ritual a useful focus for cultural analysis; the field of medieval history is no exception. Given the ever-wider application of the word “ritual” to describe human experience, Catherine Bell’s estimation that “the term is long overdue for an extended critical thinking” (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* 3) is certainly correct. Philippe Buc provides just such a critique in *The Dangers of Ritual*, in which he claims that ultimately ritual is not a legitimate category of analysis for the period he studies.

Buc’s work examines political ritual in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. It is divided into two sections. In the first he examines four types of ritual activity: one each from the late Roman period, the Merovingian world of Gregory of Tours, Carolingian Europe, and the Ottonian reign of the early eleventh century. The second section of the book is an historiographical discussion of the evolution of the concept of “ritual” in Western Christian thinking and scholarship. The author notes that from the first century Christian society has operated with a dualistic and conflicting notion of ritual as both sacral/ potent or artificial/superstitious.

Buc’s skepticism of the value of ritual studies is based on what he sees as the inclination of historians to use anthropological tools simplistically in analyzing rituals that we can only know through an artifact—the text. Buc says, “For the early Middle Ages and most of late antiquity,

simple access to a ritual as historical fact is impossible if by 'fact' one understands 'event'" (248). Further "because of the importance the [medieval] culture attached to solemnities," written descriptions of early medieval political rituals are "highly crafted," (9) manipulated, or forged. In other words, because we moderns cannot actually witness medieval rituals in progress, but just read texts about rituals—many of which do not attempt to describe the rites impartially—we cannot replicate the work that anthropologists carry out in the field when they observe ritual first-hand. This is a useful observation, but ultimately Buc over emphasizes the "dangers of ritual." Although we cannot watch medieval ritual in practice, we can still profitably apply tools developed by the social sciences to the investigation of rituals as presented in texts. We should not reject the perspectives that have come out of ritual studies wholesale as Buc claims to do when he cautions "against the use of the concept of ritual for the historiography of the Middle Ages," and says, "Ultimately, there can be no anthropological readings of rituals depicted in medieval texts" (1, 4). I say "claims to" because in fact Buc himself relies heavily on "anthropological readings" in his work to analyze ritual as presented (misrepresented/manipulated) in texts. Further, when Buc claims that we cannot read texts the way an anthropologist might "read" a ritual in front of him, he implies that a single and true understanding of the raw data of a ritual is possible if a person witnesses it firsthand, which is not the case. Anthropologists have long recognized that no one "true read" of a ritual is possible. The researcher is always external to the ritualized event and "reads" it though a particular lens. In short, all disciplines, not just the medieval historian's, interpret ritual second-hand or from a cultural distance. Buc's *Dangers of Ritual* is a fascinating, well researched, and beautifully written study of ritual practice in a period when formalized, symbolic behavior was finely developed and highly significant, and the historiographical portion of the book is a useful and insightful analysis of the history of the word "ritual." However, the author's disparagement of the usefulness of ritual studies in understanding the Early Middle Ages should not be taken too much to heart.

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For Further Reading See:

Tambiah, Stanley Jeyaraja. *Magic, Science, and Religion, and the Scope of Rationality*. Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Bell, Catherine. *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Muir, Edward. *Ritual in Early Modern Europe*. New Approaches to European History. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

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